Telephone interview with Rosella Nesgis Asbelle, Navy nurse at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, and later assigned to Naval Hospital Oakland's Occupational Therapy Department with amputee patients during the Korean War. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 13 June 2002. (1915-2012)

Where are you originally from?

I was born in Oklahoma but we came out to California when I was about 7 years old--a little town called Dinuba near Fresno.

Where did you go to nursing school?

I went to St. Mary's Hospital School of Nursing, San Francisco, CA.

And you were a Navy nurse.

I was very definitely a Navy nurse. I was at Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941.

What do you remember about that?

Everything. I saw Japanese planes coming over. They were so low, they were right on top of the building.

Then you knew Ruth Erickson.

We were all together. Ruth is a very knowledgeable person. I have all the addresses of the 29 Navy nurses who were at Pearl. We try to keep in touch with each other. I think there are about eight of us still living.

I remember vividly the planes flying over the buildings right next to the nurse's quarters. The nurse in the room next to me and I were looking out the window and she gasped, "Ahh, Rosella, it's war." I'll never forget that. The planes were just above the buildings. You could see the heads of the pilots.

Ruth Erickson told me that they were so close that if you had known who they were, you could have recognized them.

That's right. One came over the building so low, maybe at the height of a flagpole. You could see their heads. This grinning Japanese guy probably was thinking, "Boy, we've got you where we want you." I'll never forget that guy with the goggles and the smile on his face.

Did you have duty that morning?

It was 8 o'clock in the morning and I don't remember if I had duty that morning. But it didn't take long before the chief nurse called everybody over to the wards and casualties started coming in. And they continued coming in throughout the day. The heads or toilets were right outside the wards and there was a walkway between the ward and the head. The bodies were laid out like stacks of wood on that passageway connecting the ward and the toilet.

Did you work in the surgical area?

I was in the surgical ward and when they needed surgery they went to the operating room. Later on, I was transferred to the burn ward because there were so many people who were burned from the fires.

I read that you sprayed tannic acid on the burns.
That's right.

You must have seen some pretty horrible things that day.
It was really tragic. These kids were so young and so burned. I remember a radio blaring the song, "I Don't Want to Set the World On Fire," when some kid at the end of the ward yelled out, "Lady, you're too late. It's done been set." At that time, the wards had anywhere from 20 to 30 patients per ward. And I was on the burn ward. These kids were all lined up with tannic acid applications all over.

The saddest thing, though, was having night duty. That's when these severely burned kids would die. And you'd know when that was going to happen. Many a time, I'd sit by the bed of a young man, boy, who was burned, as he died talking about his family. It was generally about 4:30 or 5:30 in the morning when most of them went. You'd hold their hands and talk to them about their families.

That must have been terribly sad for you.
Yes. These kids were so young.

I'm sure that even if you don't remember everything that happened subsequently at Oakland, you'll probably never forget that day as long as you live.
I don't think anyone would.

Where did you go after Pearl Harbor?
I think I was sent back to Oak Knoll--that is the Naval Hospital in Oakland, CA.

My intent today is to talk to you about your time at Oakland.
I was at Mare Island first. They had a rehabilitation plan for amputees there. Then we were all transferred to Oak Knoll.

Were you still in the Navy at this time?
I went into the Navy in 1937. I was in San Diego first and then I was transferred to Pearl Harbor and several other places, and then was at Mare Island. As an occupational therapist, I used to teach the arm amputees how to use their prostheses.

When would you have been at Mare Island?
I went to occupational therapy school in Boston. It was the Boston School of Occupational Therapy. It wasn't a Navy school but there were a group of us who were sent there. They gave us our choice of either going to the school for occupational therapy or physical therapy. I chose occupational therapy.

How long were you there at the school?
Eighteen months.

Where did you go after leaving the school?
When we finished, I was sent to Mare Island. I guess that would have been about 1948.

Were you at Mare Island when the Korean War broke out?

Yes.

Did you start seeing patients coming in from Korea right away?

Being in occupational therapy, we had a department of our own. I wasn't involved in the actual admitting of the patients. They were admitted to the wards. Then we got them as a spinoff from treatment that was needed for arms. I used to train the arm amputees how to use their prostheses.

When did you go to Oakland?

When Mare Island closed and my whole department was transferred to Oak Knoll. That was in 1950.

What would a typical day have been like for you at Oakland in 1951 or so?

It was all routine. We had a rather large occupational therapy department which I was in charge of. The leg amputees were across the street in the physical therapy department where they were trained to use their leg prostheses, and I was in the occupational therapy department with the arms.

Why would there have been a difference? Why would physical therapy gotten the legs, and occupational therapy the arms?

With occupational therapy, we would have been training them to use their prostheses through a variety of activities and crafts that required them to manipulate their prostheses, and in physical therapy they were training them to walk. They had a very active walking program for the amputees.

Could you describe the walking program? How long after the fitting of a leg prosthesis would the patient have begun therapy?

They started them out right away. There was no need to wait. They would put them on their prosthesis and have them adjust their walking to the height of the bars. The nurse there would very carefully monitor them.

How would the arm program have worked? Let's say you just got a new patient who had been fitted with a prosthesis. Would you have gotten them at that point?

Yes. They would first be assigned to our department and we had activities that required them to use their prosthesis.

What types of activities would they have done?

We had everything. We had a woodworking shop and a leather shop, ceramics. They could choose whatever they wanted, and patients often did several activities.

Which of those activities did you oversee?

I had all of them. We generally had corpsmen who actually worked with the amputees. I was more like a supervisor.

Do you ever remember any specific patients. Sarah Chapman mentioned to me that most of your patients were very young and, for the most part they were in very good spirits. Is that your recollection?

Oh, yes. They had a hilarious time. After all, they were young kids and there wasn't very much that would keep them down, including the loss of a leg or an arm. They went with the tide.

Were there any specific patients you might have remembered as being exceptional or didn't take that well to the training?

No. I think they all did very well. They were intent on getting the most that they could out of their rehabilitation and went for it. I can't remember any patient who didn't profit from the training because they had others to look at. When they saw that others were doing okay, they'd say, "If he can do it, why can't I?" They were eager to learn as much as they could and get on with their lives.

So they were motivated by their comrades.

Yes.

How long would a patient have been in occupational therapy with an arm before they would be discharged? Was there a set time or did it depend on the progress they were making?

It depended on the progress they made, the nature of their injury, and their attitude.

Were you involved in making those decisions as to when you thought they were ready to go?

No. That was done by the medical staff--by the doctors.

Do remember Dr. Canty?

Very well. He was very dedicated to his patients. As a matter of fact, my husband, who worked with him, was right there and that's all they did was train the leg amputees.

How did the typical arm prosthesis function? What did it look like?

It was made out of metal and there were cables that attached to the shoulder muscles.

Was the hand a hook or some other kind of device, or did they have some kind of hand?

They had both. They had hooks. Later on they developed the hand. The hand wasn't as convenient as the hook, which you could grasp anything with very quickly. It was just a two-pronged unit. The hand was a bit more difficult to control and harder to use.

In the shops, such as the woodworking shop, what kind of things would the patients make?

They made little bird cages and small furniture like chairs and footstools and other things. In the leather department they made wallets, women's purses, belts. In the ceramics department, we had forms that they could pour the clay into. Some would do free-form also and make whatever they wanted. We had four or five looms and patients made rugs, too.

How long did you stay at Oakland working in the occupational therapy department?

I was there about 2 years and then got married. At that time, females in the service could not be married so I was required to resign.

Was it after the war was over?

Oh, yes. I was in the Navy 15 years.

What did you do after you got out of the Navy?

I got married and we had two children. After the kids were raised, then I took a course in real estate, got my license, and sold real estate for 10 or 12 years.

Did you know the Surgeon General at that time, Admiral Pugh?

He was a special friend of mine. He used to tease me on the ward. He always teased the nurses. He had a nice little smile. He was just a very good doctor and I enjoyed working with him. He had a marvelous sense of humor.

Thank you so much for spending time with me this afternoon.

Good luck to you.